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BOOK REVIEWS.

LES AFFIRMATIONS DE LA CONSCIENCE MODERNE, par Gabriel Séailles. Paris: Armand Colin, 1905.

EDUCATION OU RÉVOLUTION, par Gabriel Séailles: Paris: Armand Colin.

M. Séailles has made it the business of his life to make the French democracy conscious of its own soul. As President of the "Union pour l'action morale" he has done more than any living Frenchman to inspire the work of social and political reform with moral earnestness and purpose. These volumes are the record of his attempt. They are the sermons of a Freethinker, yet warm from lips touched with something of the sacred fire. They are as little like the utterances of a university professor as can well be imagined. Yet their significance is that they were spoken by one of the most capable teachers of the Sorbonne.

We must take M. Séailles, at any rate for the present, on his own ground. Christianity is for him a system from which we have definitely emerged. It has ceased to influence modern life still more because of its moral inefficiency than because of its doctrinal bankruptcy. Indeed its dogmas have for him been evacuated of their living force principally because of their correspondence with and their symbolical expression of a morality that has become outworn. It is true that he devotes one of the essays in his volume on the affirmations of the modern conscience to an exposition of the conflict between Christian dogma and the modern scientific view of the world. But it is the moral rift between Christianity as he understands it and the modern conscience which weighs with him chiefly in his judgment of the former.

It must not be supposed, however, that M. Séailles is obtuse to the moral charm and attractiveness of Christianity. His indictment is determined and even passionate, but it aims at being scrupulously just and it succeeds in being occasionally even sympathetic. It is evident that he would willingly hold his hand if it were possible. It is a new note in the campaign of militant Freethought. He recognizes wholeheartedly the beauty of the preëminent Christian virtues, charity and humility. But he holds that they are deprived of the full measure of their efficacy by their connection with an absolute doctrine of Providence. That doctrine reduces them to the ineffectual expressions of an ideal optimism or the not too

effectual alleviations of a practical pessimism. It is for this reason that he claims that there is a positive moral element in the mere negation of Christian ethics. The static order of things receives from Christian belief a kind of ultimate sanction. The dynamic order has been hardly recognized by it. In virtue of its theoretic idealism it is the necessary enemy of progress.

M. Séailles finds in the recognition of the dynamic conditions of life at once the basis and the sanction of morals. The secret of the individual life is the conflict of inner forces, the sense of a hierarchy of values among them, the ceaseless and instinctive quest of a harmony between them by the reduction of the lower to the service of the higher, the satisfying triumph of reason over instinct, of a distant over an immediate good. The reality of goodness, or rather of the good, is given in this essential nature of the inner life. And a similar experience recurs in our relation with the outer world. The demands of the reason and the heart are being constantly denied by the actual facts of life. Nature is red in tooth and claw, or is relentlessly indifferent to the weal of man. Its rage has to be patiently exorcised. Its force has to be wheedled into submission, its indifference coaxed into coöperation. By his instinct of reason man is continually extracting some kind of order out of nature's confusion. But what he has at any moment secured fails to satisfy him. The history of the past is to his mood of the present nothing but a record of bungling failures, of moral scandal. Yet there lies his undying hope, the certainty of his moral force, the guarantee of the continuance of his moral life. He rejects the past only because it is his surmounted self. He toils towards the future as towards the self that he would be. He lives only in the fuller order which he can create. Here is the sufficient evidence of his moral nature, the eternal sanction of his moral effort. And here, too, is the growing revelation of what morality is. It is not offered as an afterthought to life already in existence, but given in the very essence of life as the principle by which it is, as the energy through which it acts, as the good towards which it moves.

By this test M. Séailles examines the distinctive affirmations of the modern conscience, which he gathers together under the Revolutionary watchwords of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He considers these moral ideals as more adequate than the ascetic morality which he attributes to Christianity, because they correspond with a progressive conception of human history. But he is

fully alive to the danger of their becoming in turn the bulwarks of a static view of society or worse still the instruments of its dissolution. They must not remain moral formulas, but must become moral forces. Liberty may too easily remain for the individual the mere right to do what he will, the removal of the last shackle upon the effectuation of momentary desire. But our very nature, rightly understood, is the sufficient protest against such a fatal tendency. It soon teaches us that such liberty becomes the most intolerable slavery. The truth is that freedom from external restraint is not moral liberty at all, but only, in the degree in which it can ever be attained, its condition, and even then only its negative condition. True liberty is not a mere outer condition, but a real inner acquisition. It is not the opportunity of doing what we please, but the power, patiently acquired by the use of that opportunity, of becoming and doing the highest that we can will. And this is the only kind of freedom which can justify and permanently establish a true social freedom in the human world outside ourselves. To let ourselves go is the sure precursor of leaving things alone, and to leave things alone must result in the accentuation of the war of natural forces from which it was the very object of freedom to deliver us.

In the same way equality may prove itself the dream of an absurd or even harmful idealism. Life has its differences of original gift and of acquired character. We cannot stereotype if we would what nature has stamped with the hall-mark of her variety. But none the less equality means something of a prerogative importance both in the outer condition and in the inner life. It means the cancelling in the interest of an even-handed justice of every artificial privilege which the mere inertia of society tends continually to create and establish. The jealous elimination of such privileges is the evidence of moral force in every society which it characterizes. The lazy or despairing submission to their existence or their continuance is the certain mark of moral decay. But equality is still more an inner virtue. It is the recognition under all natural varieties of the essential oneness of humanity, of a still deeper natural equality which binds us all together. It is the transmutation of the Christ virtue of humility, the immediate affirmation of that which is most deeply and broadly human in us, the deliverance from the pride of accidental differences, the deliberate entrance into the republic of the simple-hearted. It is the kind of equality which would express itself socially in the banishment of

petty rivalries and absurd social ambitions, in the disappearance of silly pretensions, of insane luxury, of stupid prejudices, of the gross vulgarity which fosters caste distinction.

Similarly, fraternity may be the mere nerveless recognition of our common lot. But the fraternity of which M. Séailles speaks as specially characteristic of modern modes of feeling is more than this. It is more even than the sympathy which urges us to the alleviation of suffering, more than the untrustworthy altruism which deceives itself by the pretence that it has left egotism behind, by the belief that it can do so. It is the positive conversion of egotism into altruism through the increasing conviction that it is our own interests that are at stake in the fortunes of others, that their real loss is our loss, that what is really gain to them is gain to us. And it is thus the intelligence of what is really human in us all, the consistent and continuous effort to make it prevail. Fraternity has not begun to be so long as the fortunate accept it as inevitable that there will be whole classes of men condemned to a wretched and hopeless life, so long as the miserable regard the lot of the fortunate with a conviction which must always degenerate into hatred. It can only express itself in the steady will to reach the true human dignity and to help others to reach it. That dignity is violated by the wanton luxury of the rich, by the debasing misery of the poor. True fraternity depends upon the growing sense of what is worthy of man, upon the growing determination to make life correspond with that worthiness.

It will be seen that M. Séailles' answer to the question, what is morality, is briefly, "Live, and you will discover." The modern conscience has clearly affirmed, at least the conditions of life which will lead to this discovery. Liberty, equality, fraternity, are merely such conditions. They refuse to allow us to find the nature of the good in the dictates of mere individual or social interest. They urge us on through all individual and social interest towards a real and permanent human good for which we are always feeling, towards an end in which the individual and social interest may become one, in which we may touch the good that is so simply human that it is no longer yours or mine but essentially yours and mine. The goal towards which they impel us proves itself to be the true human goal in that it always recedes before our approach and always beckons us on. It is not something that we may reach, but something that we must follow. And the true satisfaction of man lies in following, not in attaining. The abso-

lutes of life are not given in a prior knowledge which could only paralyze action. They are found in life itself, in action which is the passionate search for them. As M. Séailles puts it: "To know God, let us go forth to meet Him." It is but Pascal's conviction over again: "In that thou art seeking me, thou hast already found me."

Two great practical counsels recur with infinite variations in these two volumes. Avoid intolerance and avoid mere force. Intolerance is the fruitful mother of the viper brood which poisons life and devours it. It is a more unpardonable sin against humanity on the part of the Freethinker for whom truth is but relative and human, than on the part of the Christian for whom it is absolute and divine. And force is the mother of all hatred and strife. It invariably defeats its own purpose. Human history has reached the stage where the blind forces of occasional revolution must be replaced by the steady disciplined intelligent action of the reason and the heart.

The only criticism of M. Séailles in which one might be inclined to indulge is that he seems to ignore the fact that even in his own country, still more in Protestant countries, there are Christian teachers who are in entire sympathy with this view of the nature of morality and of its relation to life. They, too, conceive of morality as dynamic and not static. They too feel that the absolutes of life are attainments of the incessant and unending spiritual labor of humanity, not objects of its antecedent knowledge. A knowledge of them indeed they would claim, but it is a knowledge of the heart rather than of the mind, a knowledge, too, which has been inherited out of past living and must be transmuted through present living into the clearer knowledge of the future. And they would admit that all intellectual apprehension of these absolutes must be imperfect, human, symbolical. We apprehend them only for the purposes of action. For these teachers the static character of dogma has ceased to be. It too has entered upon its dynamic phase. What distinguishes such men as these from M. Séailles is that they still hope to recommend the main truths for which both of them are contending as a development of the Christianity of the past, while he thinks that the breach with that past is irrevocable, or, if not, then necessary. But whether they join hands or not, they are working towards a common end in a common spirit.

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